

THE PSYCHOLOGIST AND THE MYSTIC: WILLIAM JAMES'S USE OF SWEDENBORGIAN DOCTRINE, DESPITE TRYING TO LEAVE SWEDENBORG OUT AS MUCH AS HE POSSIBLY COULD

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The life and works of William James laid the foundation for modern concepts of psychology and application of psychological concepts. From his ideas in *Psychology: A Briefer Course* to the ideas of philosophy in *Pragmatism*, his ideas were brilliant new concepts in the field. This, from the man who “would flounder for twelve years in search of vocation”¹ who finally found his footing in the science of the psychological world. In short, “William James was a gifted young man, and the length of time required before he found his direction could be considered natural for a youth with multiple talents and a family with ample financial resources to support his wanderings.”² Only after rebelling against his father and the religion of his youth, a time in medical school, struggles with depression, and vacations ranging from painting in Europe to sketching in Brazil, did he finally find his footing in philosophy, psychology, and religion. This personal need to flounder empowered James’s later professional life with the imagination he would need to develop new ideas.

Late in his career James wrote a series of lectures entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, which was the fruition of these new ideas. This work, despite his earlier rebellion and more than any other, draws on his childhood religious experiences in Swedenborgian philosophy, espoused by his father. Even so, there is a conspicuous absence of Swedenborg’s name throughout the vast majority of the work. James’s reliance on Swedenborgian teachings provided complexity for his arguments in most chapters of the *Varieties*. Nevertheless, it was Swedenborg’s own mystical experiences and concepts that shaped the *entire* lecture on Mysticism; additionally, Swedenborg’s own visions would set the boundaries for what James would call the “mystical experience.”

1. Feinstein, Howard M. *Becoming William James*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999, 89.

2. *Ibid.*

To understand how James came to these realizations in his lecture on *Mysticism* and the *Varieties* as a whole, one must first understand his family history. Henry James Sr., the “father of two famous sons”³ was a man who believed that his Swedenborgian faith was life-giving, while Calvinism was a death-dealing falsehood of a religion.⁴ Henry’s whole life seemed to revolve around this religion as Feinstein states, “Henry finally found his vocation as a publicist of a unique version of Swedenborgian theology In letter after letter, lecture after lecture, book after book, the mystery of a God who would inflict evil on his own son goaded him on.”⁵ Henry was one of the foremost Swedenborgian philosophers of his day though somewhat ostracized by what was called the New Church community. His insistence that a new denomination or church be avoided set him apart from those in his day; he was abhorrently against ecclesiastical forms.

Many in the Swedenborgian “New Church” movement longed for their own congregation, but Henry vehemently argued against it in the pamphlet, *The Church of Christ is not an Ecclesiasticism*. In it he states, “When we look for a new church in the earth which is to be the crown and consummation of all former churches, we are not to look for a mere second edition of existing ecclesiasticism.”⁶ This evasion as well the consistent philosophical stance his father took against ecclesiastical development would set the tone for James’s desire to focus on the individual in nearly all of his works. With this knowledge one can see that William James was surrounded by a peculiar philosophy as a child and that this philosophy also revolved around a peculiar type of God.

The God that William grew up with was one in which “a Heavenly Father like Swedenborg’s, loved all his creatures generously and unconditionally. Such a God promised forgiveness.”⁷ The God that William knew was not one of rigid condemnation or brimstone, so common in that era. Instead, this God was universal in all religions and accepting of many paths to heaven. Swedenborg states, “Those who are outside the Church

3. Ibid., 39.

4. Ibid., 40.

5. Ibid., 62.

6. James, Henry. “The Church of Christ Not an Ecclesiasticism: A Letter to a Sectarian.” Published 1854, <https://archive.org/stream/churchofchristno00jame#page/n0/mode/2up>, p.i, Accessed April 27, 2015.

7. Ibid., 77.

but nevertheless acknowledge one God, and in keeping with their religion lead a life of some kind of charity towards the neighbor, are in communion with those who belong to the Church.”⁸ There was no mistaking: from early in his youth James would have been taught about the good in all who attempted charity to the neighbor, not just those saved by grace. Since being kind, and loving your community, is the heartbeat of nearly every religion, James would have grown up respecting all of them in one way or another. It was Swedenborg’s teachings and his father’s adherence to non-ecclesiastical organization that provided the underpinnings in universal thought for William’s comprehension of religion, and for its application as well.

William’s emphasis was on an individual experience rather than a communal one. This is no surprise given his childhood cultural experience and his father’s apprehension of all things ecclesiastical. This focus is especially true for many of his works including *Psychology*, *Pragmatism* and the *Varieties*. Childhood teachings die hard, and this sentiment reigned supreme in nearly everything that James published. In *Psychology: The Briefer Course* there is not a single chapter devoted to the community and how it might or might not affect a person’s psychological standing; instead, each chapter focuses on the individual and how they may change, relate to, or grow with that which is around them. James focuses a person from the inside out rather than outside in. One might see this as a coincidence rather than a true application of childhood culture if it were not for the fact that this happens again and again in his other works.

Pragmatism, his philosophical work, is much the same, and he sets the stage in lecture one by stating, “For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.”⁹ His entire model for the development of pragmatism and the application of new truths is always based on the individual archetype. To James it seems as if these concepts could not be developed within a group, and it is only from a complete absence of any communal concepts

8. Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. [London, England: John Lewis, 1749–1756] Translated by John E. Elliott. London, England: Swedenborg Society, 1983-1999. Retrieved from: newchristianbiblestudy.org. § 10765.

9. James, William. *Pragmatism*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1991, 5.

that James views pragmatism as an individual philosophical approach. It makes one wonder why he even lectured on the topic within in a communal setting! Again, a second example could also be written off as coincidence; philosophy, after all, is often seen as an individual undertaking. Yet the model continues.

James's disdain for ecclesiastical and communal forms of religion plainly demonstrates itself in the *Varieties* as well. In it he states, "On the lowest possible plane, one sees how the expedience of obedience in a firm ecclesiastical organization must have led to its being viewed as meritorious."¹⁰ Additionally, in the following lecture on "The Value of Saintliness" he states, "When groups get strong enough to 'organize' themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rules are then apt to enter and contaminate the originally innocent thing."¹¹ It is in the communal structure that James sees the corruption of religion or the religious experience; this is because of direct teachings from his father. Henry stated, "You never find Swedenborg discussing any questions of ecclesiastical polity, or urging any measures of ecclesiastical reform."¹² Instead, the focus was always on the spiritual nature of the individual and that was something that William applied in nearly everything he published. He took his childhood upbringing in Swedenborgian philosophy beyond the individual model, and he also pursued it in his application of respect towards other religions.

It is true that Universalist ideas were popular among academics in William's day. But the length to which he goes in the *Varieties* leads one to suspect that his childhood upbringing aided his ability to be bluntly open about applying universalist principles to the religious experience. Further, he applies an existential point of view to the religious experience, and, lest he offend, he makes this statement in his first lecture:

There are many religious persons—some of you now present, possibly, are among them—who do not yet make a working use of the distinction and who may therefore feel at first a little startled at the purely existential point of view

10. James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2002, 313.

11. *Ibid.*, 335.

12. James, Henry, *The Church of Christ is not an Ecclesiasticism*, p. 14.

from which in the following lectures the phenomena of religious experience must be considered. When I handle them biologically and psychologically as if they were mere curious facts of individual history, some of you may think it degradation of so sublime a subject.¹³

Even for the academics in the lecture hall, William James knew that his handling of the religious experience either universally or existentially might be offensive. In short, this was not a normal academic insight or position; it was profound, and it was different, or the statement would not have been necessary. He could not avoid such an application; the concept of universalism was ingrained in him from childhood. When your father studies a man who would later become know as the Buddha of the North¹⁴ it is of no surprise that such a staunch resistance to mere Christian application of religious concepts would take place.

William James's childhood culture initiated his perspectives on faith and religion. As one sees in the previous paragraphs this was true for his universal and existential approach to religion and the focus on the individual experience as opposed to ecclesiastical models in his lectures within the *Varieties* as a whole. As opposed to many of his previous works this lecture series moved from the realm of psychology into one of religious experience. Without previous instruction from his childhood religion, his father's insistence on a scientific career or his ability to wander all those years, James's formation of what would and would not constitute a mystical experience (let alone any other of the religious experiences in the *Varieties*) would not have come to fruition.

In true Jamsian form the presence of boundaries is clear, but there is an absence of the literal boundary in context. When it comes to the individual versus the communal or ecclesiastical model James never states why; it simply is the way he does it. This happens repeatedly, for example in the *Varieties*, while the foundation of many of the lectures are formed in Swedenborg's thought and the chapter on mysticism is completely based on his model—there are only two mentions of Swedenborg within the entire lecture series and these mentions are buried in the footnotes. First, found in the lecture on *Conversion* is one such example, "One night I was

13. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

14. Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, and Andrew Bernstein. *Swedenborg Buddha of the North*. West Chester, Pa.: Swedenborg Foundation, 1996, title page.

seized on entering bed with a rigor, such as Swedenborg describes.”¹⁵ Swedenborg is not even quoted; rather, it is one man’s experience *with* a Swedenborgian-like experience that is heralded.

Secondly, this is the case again near the end of the lecture series in *Other Characteristics* where a person’s experience is described and their attachment to Swedenborg is noted in the footnotes, it is explained, “Mr. Clissold is a Swedenborgian. Swedenborg’s case is of course the primary one of *audita et visa*, serving as a basis of religious revelation.”¹⁶ This is a short statement with a lot of oomph. James notes that Swedenborg’s case is one of religious revelations, which are seen and heard (in a chapter that has little to do with religious revelations!). Still, this citation does little in the way of addressing why anything about Swedenborg, his visions, or his revelations might apply.

It is interesting to note that Swedenborg believed that, “the bible contained what he called ‘The Word,’ teachings which could only be properly understood through a system of spiritual correspondences,”¹⁷ meaning that what is said is rarely exactly what is meant. For example, the color red in the Word corresponds to what is good while the color white in the Word corresponds to what is true.¹⁸ In short, nearly every written statement within “The Word” corresponds to something on a spiritual level and what is stated rarely is what is meant. The Bible itself should rarely be taken literally but always be taken seriously because it consistently corresponds to the spiritual world. It seems that James followed suit in this particular writing style. He routinely uses his childhood culture and religious understanding of Swedenborg but rarely, if ever, references any of these in one of his works.

James routinely states his beliefs but never directly; instead, he allows them to correspond to this ideological system rather than saying them in a straightforward manner. His childhood religion, barely mentioned, carries the weight of his belief in mysticism and yet this too is not mentioned.

15. *Ibid.*, 198.

16. *Ibid.*, 481.

17. Haller, John S. “From Mental Science to New Thought.” In *Swedenborg, Mesmer, and the Mind/body Connection the Roots of Complementary Medicine*. West Chester, Pa.: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010, 165.

18. Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Love and Wisdom*. [Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1763] Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester, PA, USA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2003. Retrieved from: newchristianbiblestudy.org. § 380.

Additionally, there is not one mention of Swedenborg in the lecture of *Mysticism* whatsoever. Yet, the lecture borrows most heavily from his father's chosen religion. While this absence may seem conspicuous to some, the culture of correspondence or, saying things without saying them, follows the same model and culture of James's childhood religious mystic.

While the entirety of the *Varieties* focuses on religion and has hints of its Swedenborgian roots, it is the chapter on *Mysticism* that most closely follows the mystical experiences of Swedenborg. Instead of believing that James came to a conclusion about mysticism that *happened* to mirror Swedenborg it would seem more likely that James based his concepts of mysticism on the mystic whose teachings dominated his childhood. First, there are several areas where James and Swedenborg are similar in general. These include an appreciation for the mystical experience, meditation techniques practiced by both and the use of alcohol in regards to the mystical experience.

James states early in the lecture on mysticism that, "Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand."¹⁹ The most important words in this quotation are "almost entirely" as James's own experience with mental illness and being restored to a sort of sanity is well documented. James himself may not have considered this a mystical experience; yet, it fits into his own definition of what a mystical experience might be. Whether this was a seemingly lack of self-awareness on William's part or he simply resisted the idea of putting himself in the same camps as his father and Swedenborg we will never know.

Secondly, James valued ideas relating to the practice of meditation in his work *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* he references it saying,

We forget that every good that is worth possessing must be paid for in strokes of daily effort . . . Whereas ten minutes a day of poetry, of spiritual reading or meditation, and an hour or two a week at music, pictures, or philosophy,

19. Ibid., 379.

provided we began *now* and suffered no remission, would infallibly give us in due time the fullness of all we desire.²⁰

It was one of Swedenborg's most valuable assets as well. His meditation practice was well known. For example, in a 2012 *Huffington Post* article the author states, "Through the Kabbala, meditation, and a system of erotic exercises, Swedenborg trained himself to enter extended periods of altered consciousness. One result of this is his fascinating *Dream Diary*, whose analysis of dream symbolism predates Freud and Jung by more than a century."²¹ These two men, over a hundred years apart, realized the benefits of meditative practice; furthermore, they both acknowledged how this practice would be beneficial in general but also within the mystical experience.

Emanuel Swedenborg states in his work, *Spiritual Experiences* that breathing on earth is much like the breath of heaven. He states, "A general waving of heaven was felt, and I was told that it was the breathing of heaven, through which comes the breathing of a person on earth, and of many. It matched my breathing about 3 to 2, for that breaking passes over into effort, due to which all things breathe."²² Swedenborg really loved his breathing and the incredible states they produced that brought him closer to the divine. In comparison James states, "In the condition called *raptus* or ravishment by theologians, breathing and circulation are so depressed that it is a question among the doctors where the soul be or be not temporarily dissevered from the body."²³ James realized the condition but used Saint Teresa as the example rather than Swedenborg. Regardless, it is the focus on meditation that demonstrates yet another similarity in Swedenborgian and Jamsian thought; and it is not by accident.

Lastly, there is a striking resemblance to the emphasis on mind-altering substances and the mystic for both James and Swedenborg. James refers to the state of consciousness produced by alcohol. He states,

20. James, William. *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1907, 73.

21. Lachman, Gary. "Why You Should Know Emanuel Swedenborg." *The Huffington Post*. June 19, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-lachman/why-you-should-know-emanu_b_1424489.html. Accessed April 26, 2015.

22. Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Spiritual Experiences*. [Written in 1765, not published by the author.] Translated by Durban Odhner. Bryn Athyn, PA, USA: Academy of the New Church, 1998. Retrieved from: newchristianbiblestudy.org. § 3320.

23. *Ibid.*, 412.

“The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites and says yes.”²⁴ It is this “yes” mentality that opens the doors to the mystical experience and without it one can easily shut down the experience before it ever really begins. In comparison, Swedenborg never specifically states that he used mind-altering substances in order to meditate or enter the mystical state, but he did use it regularly in life to cope and to be social. By way of his theology on correspondences he does mention what alcohol represents. He states, “We may liken wisdom purified to alcohol, which is highly rectified spirits.”²⁵ For Swedenborg wisdom was as good as purified alcohol! There are few sources that demonstrate his use of alcohol and there is a myriad of conjectures that he consumed alcohol as well as other drugs in order to sustain his mystical experiences. Many of these however, are uncorroborated conjecture from those who saw Swedenborg as a quack.

To fully understand how closely Swedenborg’s mystical experience mirrors James’s lecture on mysticism it is important to look at each factor that James says *must* be present for a mystical experience to be valid. Firstly, the person having the mystical experience must be noetic. He states, “mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.”²⁶ Secondly, the mystical experience must be ineffable. He states, “It defies expression that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words . . . more like states of feeling than like states of intellect.”²⁷ These two *musts* mirror Swedenborg’s experience exactly.

There was not a mystical experience for Swedenborg that did not include lessons from the Lord, angels and spirits that he saw as Divine revelation and as authoritative. In his work *Divine Providence* he states, “It has been given me to see [the light of heaven], and from it to perceive distinctly what has come from the Lord, and what from the angels. What has come from the Lord has been written, and what has come from angels

24. *Ibid.*, 257.

25. Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Conjugal Love*. [Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1768] Translated by William Wunsch. New York, NY, USA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1937. Retrieved from: newchristianbiblestudy.org, § 145.

26. *Ibid.*, 380.

27. *Ibid.*, 380

has not been written."²⁸ In short, his wisdom and teachings were not even from the angels he often spoke with, but instead directly from God and therefore true. While his experiences with angels and spirits are well documented these lessons are not held in the same regard as those lessons he received directly from the Lord.

While it is accurate to state that Swedenborg was prolific in his writing it is also true that he had a difficult time expressing his dreams and visions in the real world; in fact, this was why being prolific was so necessary. To make a point, Swedenborg will often go through a process. This process includes telling a story of a conversation he had had with angels, spirits, or the Lord. Then he explains what the story means to him and what it should mean to those reading it, and then he goes on to say how it corresponds with in the world and why it matters. He will then go into detail about what it means for the New Church (or individuals who are a part of the New Church, because of their own spiritual change). This lesson will show up again in other works and be explained in other ways, with other stories told by different spirits or angels. One such example of this process is the opening to his work *Conjugal Love* in which the first 28 pages recount his experience in heaven, followed by dozens of pages that attempt to explain the experience and its importance to the reader.²⁹ This process occurs over and over. Swedenborg's writings are a clear example of the frantic need to explain the unexplainable and ineffable experiences he was having to a world that could not fully understand.

James believed that, "These two characters [ineffability and noetic quality] will entitle any state to be called mystical, in the sense in which I used the word."³⁰ With these qualities in mind it is quite easy to see the similarity between what James regarded as a mystical experience, and the experiences that Swedenborg himself had. It would be strange, that upon hearing and reading Swedenborg's experiences throughout his childhood that James would somehow manage to come up with these parameters outside of this knowledge. Yet, it does not stop there. James continues to add several other qualities that he notes some mystics have;

28. Swedenborg, Emmanuel. *Divine Providence*. Translated by Rev. N. Bruce Rogers. Bryn Athyn, PA, USA: General Church of the New Jerusalem, 2003. Retrieved from: newchristianbiblestudy.org, § 135.

29. *Ibid.*, § 1.

30. *Ibid.*, 381.

however, he does not believe these qualities are absolutely necessary for a mystical experience to be real. It is either an extreme coincidence that neither of these “possibilities” have any correlation with Swedenborg, or it is completely understandable that James realizes that some mystics have these qualities but Swedenborg does not; thus, they are optional.

In the same way James lists two additional qualities that a person having a mystical experience *may* but not necessarily *must* have. These qualities are that of the transient and passive experience. Of transiency James states, “Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.”³¹ Describing the passive experience, James says that, “The mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.”³² While these qualities do appear in many examples in the lecture on mysticism it is important to note that they are not present in the Swedenborgian experience whatsoever.

Swedenborg’s dreams would often last for hours or even throughout the night, and “the visions were to become Swedenborg’s characteristic mark as a writer and theosopher. He filled book after book with their content. He emphasized that they were often especially clear just before going to sleep, or in the morning just before he awoke.”³³ These visions would often last throughout the night and into the next day, sometimes even when he was waking. While there are instances of Swedenborg talking about short visions, these were the exception to the rule. In most cases he was in the visions for hours at a time. Additionally, there are several indicators that these abilities were completely contingent on his willingness to join them. For example, “Swedenborg often declared that his spiritual state depended on his will. He also maintained that concentration and the ability to think presume the regulations of breathing.”³⁴ The mystic’s ability to control his breathing and meditation meant that his ability to enter the spirit world and have his visions were completely voluntary. Again, this could happen right before sleeping,

31. *Ibid.*, 381.

32. *Ibid.*, 381.

33. Bergquist, Lars. *Swedenborg’s Secret: The Meaning and Significance of the Word of God, the Life of the Angels, and Service to God: A Biography*. London: Swedenborg Society, 2005, 293.

34. *Ibid.*, 294.

right before waking or throughout the day, depending on the experience and vision he hoped to see. There is little evidence to believe that these ever happened without his consent.

The fact that Swedenborg falls in the line with James's two "musts" when it comes to mystical experiences, but conveniently not when it comes to his "maybes" gives insight into how James formulated his ideas in his lecture on Mysticism. Beyond this the shared belief in the meditative state, an appreciation for all religious experiences and an avoidance of all things ecclesiastical demonstrates James's leanings towards his father's religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It also demonstrates a cultural application for his need to address only the individual rather than communal ideals within psychology, philosophy, and religion. The entire model of his psychological and religious works relied on his childhood experience in the Swedenborgian faith, inspired by his father, despite William's best attempt at rebellion. □